

STATEMENT OF COUNCILMEMBER GEORGE L. LEVENTHAL
ON THE ANNUAL GROWTH POLICY
October 28, 2003

The purpose of the Annual Growth Policy is not to stimulate growth, nor is it to restrain growth. The purpose of the AGP is to implement the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance by staging growth so that it corresponds to the availability of the necessary infrastructure.

I am not completely confident that the AGP before us today achieves this goal for transportation. For that reason, I voted for Mrs. Praisner's motion last week that would have maintained the existing Policy Area Review test for transportation facilities until the Planning Board could advise the Council on a better transportation test. However, that motion failed by a vote of 5-4. The other night, I listened a second time to the debate over Policy Area Review on television. I am more persuaded than ever that we are sacrificing an important mechanism for managing growth. When the Council takes up the AGP again in two years, I will ask some very tough questions about what has been given away in the absence of Policy Area Review.

Nevertheless, I am not going to cast a protest vote against the AGP now, when my colleagues have done so much work to get it to this point. Although I would have preferred a tighter transportation test, this AGP does impose a stiffer Local Area Review test for Transportation and includes the School Capacity Test recommended by the Board of Education.

In addition, along with the AGP, we will be imposing the highest Impact Taxes on new development in the state of Maryland: \$8000 per new home plus an additional square-footage surtax for detached single-family homes for education, plus \$5500 per detached single-family home for transportation.

Earlier this year, the majority of this Council was pilloried for deferring consideration of these Impact Taxes until we took up the AGP this fall. A major metropolitan newspaper printed not one but three stories quoting critics of this vote who impugned the motives of Councilmembers. Several of us said at the time we might want to set the rates even higher in the fall. Some were cynical about that

statement. Guess what? We are passing Impact Tax rates that are substantially higher than those proposed in the spring, and we anticipate raising more than twice the revenue that would have been raised if we adopted these taxes in the spring.

I am frankly concerned that these Impact Taxes are so high that they will price even more families out of the Montgomery County housing market. But I will vote for them because there is a clear need to identify additional resources for our capital budget.

I understand that this new AGP may lift some areas of the county out of moratorium. But the goal of the AGP should not be to keep significant parts of the county in moratorium. In my judgment, moratorium is an admission of failure: that we have failed to provide needed infrastructure. I am committed to making significant investments in our infrastructure, for schools and transportation.

We must try to manage our county's growth in a way that preserves our high quality of life. But we have to be realistic. There are aspects of population growth that are simply beyond the control of local government. We can't tell families how many children they should have, or prevent young families with children from buying homes that are put up for sale by empty-nesters. We can't prevent cars from driving into Montgomery County from other jurisdictions and clogging our roads. That problem is aggravated by housing moratoria in Montgomery County, because they worsen a housing shortage here, forcing families to buy homes even farther away from their jobs.

The affordable housing shortage has many faces. At the very bottom of the income scale, we see a rise in homelessness. In immigrant communities, there are multiple families living in single-family homes, negatively affecting the quality of life of the families themselves, and their neighbors. Young families who want to raise their children in the county must wait for years to move out of rental housing. Public service employees, including police, fire fighters, teachers and other county employees, must commute long distances to get to work. I have spoken with professional fire fighters who live in Pennsylvania and drive an hour and a half each way to Montgomery County. We rely upon them to protect our lives and property, yet they are sleep-deprived and stressed out by their long commute because we do not

pay them enough to enable them to live here. And private sector employees, from bank tellers to nurses to warehouse managers, are vital to the county's economy but can't afford a home here. These are the faces I see in my mind as I prepare to vote for this AGP.

As we do so often on this Council, the AGP is an exercise in balancing competing priorities. We must construct more affordable housing. Yet we must also preserve open space and prevent excessive burden on our schools and our roads.

People sometimes tell me they worry that we are "paving over" every square inch of the county. I hear suggestions that we should, in effect, put a wall around the developed part of the county and say, "Stop. We won't develop any further." Well, I think that's a great idea. Such a good idea, in fact, that Montgomery County already did it in 1980 when the Agricultural Reserve was established. We have set aside one-third of the county, in perpetuity, as open space and agricultural land. Over 93,000 acres in Montgomery County have been designated for agricultural use or as open space. This summer, Montgomery County was ranked first in the nation for preserving farmland and open space by the Farmland Preservation Report. So when you hear people's concerns about urban sprawl, which I understand and sympathize with, it is important to keep in mind that we are leading the nation in preserving open space.

And while we work to maintain open space and the high quality of life that draws people here, we must also remember that our job is to meet people's needs – and people need housing, and people need jobs. It is very easy to say there are too many jobs in this county if you have a job. It is very easy to say there are too many homes being built if you have already purchased your home.

I have great confidence in the future of this extraordinary county. I believe we can continue to provide a high level of service to our dynamic and growing population without sacrificing the things that make living here so special. We will always have a certain amount of traffic congestion and we may never eliminate every last portable classroom in the county, although we will keep trying. But we have so much that other jurisdictions envy. We have good government, good management, excellent schools, parks, libraries and other

public amenities. And we have a tradition of careful planning, which has given us many more tools to control sprawl than most other jurisdictions. This AGP is not perfect but I am comfortable with the balance it strikes. I would have preferred a tighter transportation test, but I will vote yes.